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AUTHOR Turner, Lyn
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ABSTRACT

The case study of a Bulgarian immigrant child's literacy education in English as a Second Language (ESL) is presented. Focus is on the boy's literacy development within the context of a mainstream kindergarten/first grade classroom in Australia. The report details the teacher's observations in the classroom and particularly in the child's writing samples over a period of about two years. Classroom observations concern the nature and forms of the boy's interaction with other children and engagement in classroom activities. Analysis of the writing samples focuses on their content, intentions, format, and linguistic forms. The writing samples, 14 of which are reproduced here, include simple statements, a joke, illustrations, a list, a letter, opinions, a group writing activity, expository writing, a rhyming activity, and a story book. Comments on the child's oral English development are also included. In conclusion, the teacher makes some inferences about the techniques and activities used or not used, in class that may have contributed to the child's literacy development. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Second Language Writing in the Mainstream Classroom

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Lyn Turner

Deakin University: Toorak Campus
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In this paper I present a classroom teacher's insights into the literacy journey of a recently arrived ESL learner. Samples of writing collected over a two year period will highlight development towards conventional form within the social and literacy context of an Australian, whole-language, kindergarten/ grade one mainstream classroom.

In uncertain economic times funds for education diminish and the call of the 'back-to-basics' movement receives a lot of attention. Politicians blame the teachers for not teaching and 'new' approaches are espoused by academics who seek funds from a smaller pool. Many of these 'new' approaches claim to offer greater access to the power of language for marginalised groups such as those from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). Where does this leave the professional classroom teacher whose theory of language teaching and learning has evolved over many years and who understands better than anyone the needs of her students within the socio-cultural and learning context of her classroom, the school and the wider community?

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In this paper, through the writing samples from one LBOTE child, I hope to share with you an insight into one whole-language classroom. A classroom where children from LBOTE and English speaking backgrounds (ESB) are encouraged to 'join the literacy club' (Smith, 1988). An environment where the children are immersed in demonstrations of the 'how' of language being used for real purposes, where not only the teacher but other children provide the scaffolding to support learning and where a 'focus on form in context', (Long and Crookes,1992:43), at the time of need and readiness is provided.

Radi came to Australia in December, 1987. He was five years old and spoke no English on arrival. His parents, however, had learned English at school and were reasonably fluent. The family used Bulgarian at home. Books and writing were part of his home culture. He commenced school in February, 1988. His first classroom in Melbourne appears to have been a formal, teacher directed environment. In May 1988 he transferred to our school and our prep/one classroom. No specialist ESL instruction was provided, although

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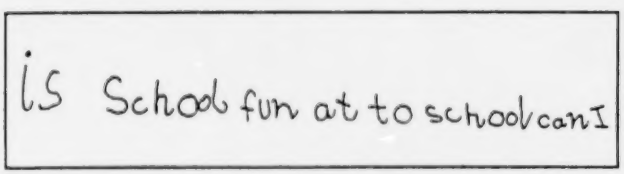
he was placed with me: an ESL-trained classroom teacher who immersed him in a whole-language classroom where 'natural' learning strategies and peer tutoring were encouraged. Most of his classmates spoke English as a mother tongue. He is a bright child with an open, sociable personality.

When Radi first arrived in our classroom he was very shy and spent a lot of time watching and listening to others. He copied what others were doing as they went about their chosen activities and soon joined in as they used the Lego or worked on an applied number activity. It was not long before he was chatting away and becoming a popular member of the group. In this environment his spoken English developed quickly; but now to his writing.

When the other members of the class settled to work on the various stages of their writing, Radi usually watched what the others were doing. Taking his cue from this, he collected pencils and paper, set himself up at a table and watched. He soon discovered that it was fine to draw in writing time and he often drew. He was a little overwhelmed by the culture of our classroom. His first Australian classroom had been very different.

Early in June he produced a small workbook he had brought from his other classroom. In this book he had copied a number of words, as directed by his teacher. He copied words from this book onto his paper. I acknowledged that he was writing and celebrated this with the other children. "Look, Radi can spell school the grown-up way", commented one child. Radi was proud of his efforts and for a number of weeks he copied out the same words.

SAMPLE 1: June 1988



At the same time Radi was engaging with many demonstrations of the 'how' of writing that showed him that reading and writing were worthwhile things to do. Reading to the children was a central part of my practice. Sharing books, commenting on content, style and particular features, demonstrating the use of non-fiction texts and building up a language for talking about the English language were a vital part of familiarising the children with the language of literature and non-fiction books and encouraging them to 'read like a writer' (Smith, 1983). Big books were used a great deal to give the children an intimacy with the print and a shared group focus for my mini-lessons that attempted to make particular features of the text salient. Writing in front of the children for real purposes and a variety of audiences and jointly constructing texts also provided many demonstrations and opportunities to engage with features of relevance to the child's developmental level. Sessions where the children shared their writing with the group allowed children to see the work of others and receive feedback while creating an environment which encouraged peer support.

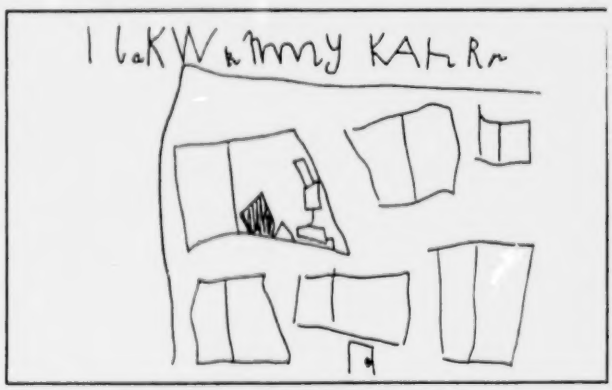
I was overjoyed when Radi created his first piece of original classroom writing on 15 July. His invented spelling was evidence that he was making meaning of the demonstrations he was immersed in and reinforced my belief that given the opportunity to engage with meaningful demonstrations children make sense of their written world in a similar way to the way they make sense of speech.

SAMPLE 2: 15th July 1988

I like holidays because I go to market with Mummy.

Radi now saw himself as a writer and he used his writing to communicate his feelings. On 19th July he expressed his feeling that it was fine to be Bulgarian in this classroom.

SAMPLE 3: 19th July 1988

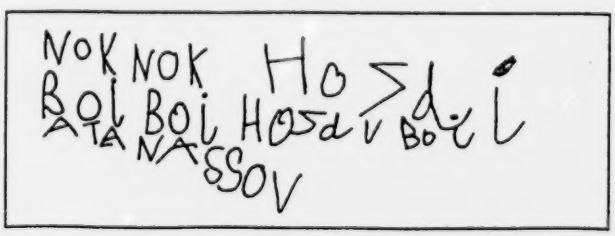


I like my country.

At this time a knock knock joke craze had hit our room. One of the children wrote a *Knock Knock Joke Book* which he shared.. This encouraged others to publish their jokes.

Radi engaged with the children's demonstrations and wrote his own knock knock joke.

SAMPLE 4: 21st July 1988



Knock Knock. Who's there?
Boo. Boo Who? Boo

.....

In August he wrote one of many pieces which indicated his exploration of the wider social environment. His artwork was also developing and he was continuing to use it to convey meaning to support his text. His written text reflects his spoken interlanguage.

SAMPLE 5: 23rd August 1988

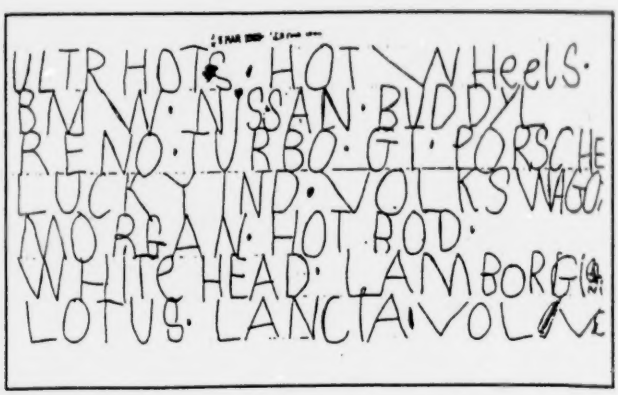
This policeman is get naughty people.

The composite grades enabled the kindergarten children to remain in the same classroom with the same teacher the following year as grade one students. This meant that we could continue to build on shared knowledge: a vital ingredient available to caregivers as they provide the scaffolding to support the child's learning.

After one year in an English-speaking environment Radi was communicatively competent in spoken English and had 'joined the literacy club'. He saw himself as a reader and a writer and used these skills to extend his knowledge and explore his world.

In March 1989 he wrote the following list of cars. I no longer needed to write a translation of his invented spelling to attach to the samples when I filed them in his writing portfolio.

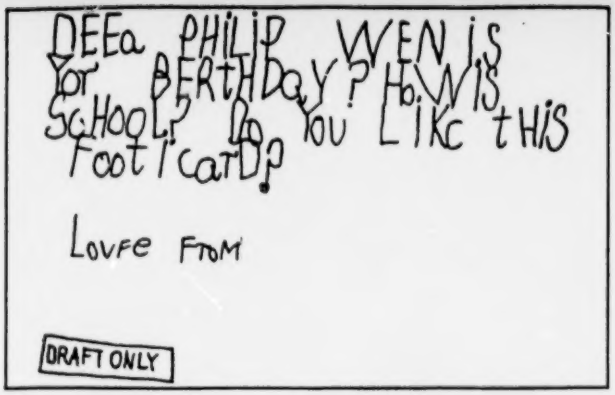
SAMPLE 6: 6th March 1989



Radi wrote the following letter to a grade 6 student who had worked with our grade. He enclosed a 'footy' (football) card and posted it in the internal school letterbox.

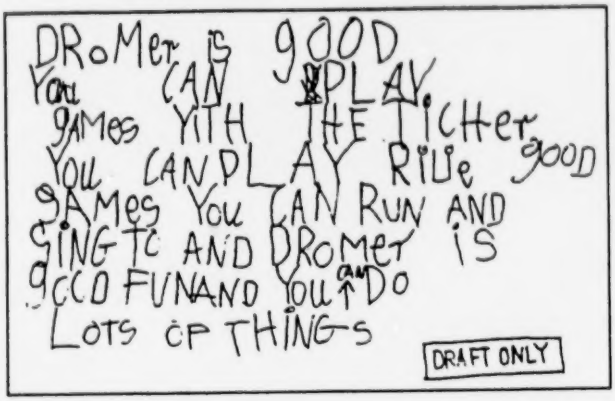
I had demonstrated the genre of letter writing for a number of purposes such as writing to the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny, parents, authors and so on. Janet and Allen Ahlberg's *The Jolly Postman* provided further demonstrations and a focus for discussion of a variety of letter genres.

SAMPLE 7: 3rd May 1989



As there had been some discussion about the continuation of the drama program I asked the children to write their opinions about drama sessions. I explained the reason for requesting this information so that the audience was clear.

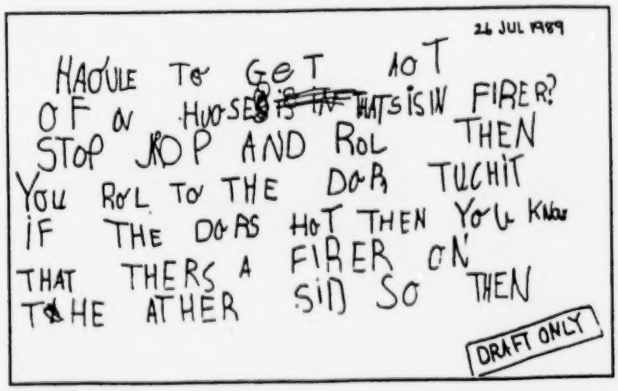
SAMPLE 8: 30th May 1989

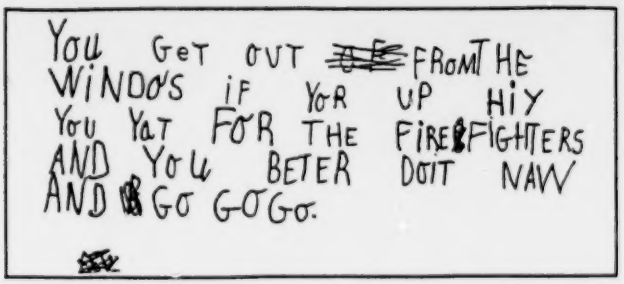


Note the inserted *can*. This is evidence that he had either proof read his text or read it to someone else. Not only the process but the product was becoming important.

About mid-July a group of children became very interested in fire-engines and fire. This self-initiated interest group formed a 'Fire Club'. They set up a table where they displayed a number of artefacts, posters and books about many aspects of fire. They went to the library to find more books and discussed the topic with Robbie's Dad who is a scientist. Radi was part of this group who spent much of their time writing about fire. Radi formed a writing partnership with Robbie and they produced a number of pieces.

SAMPLE 9: 26th July 1989 (co-authored by Radi and Robbie)


26 JUL 1989
HAOULE To GeT 10T
OF ov HUOSES ~~IS IV~~ THATS IS W FIRER?
STOP JROP AND ROL THEN
YOU ROL TO THE DOR TUCHIT
IF THE DOAS HOT THEN YOU KNOW
THAT THERS A FIRER ON
THE ATHER SID SO THEN
DRAFT ONLY



As peer conferencing was encouraged, they read this piece to a number of children for feedback, before bringing it to me for a publishing conference. They wanted it typed like a poster to display on the wall. They also requested a number of copies to display in several places throughout the school as an information poster. I had not explicitly taught them about information posters, however, I had encouraged them to look for different ways of displaying information and publishing. Radi asked that I type *go, go, go,* as at the end of *The Hungry Giant* (Story Box) when he calls out: *ow, Ow, OW*. I see this as further evidence of the reading/writing connection, the importance of reading to children and encouraging them to read like a writer.

SAMPLE 10: The Poster

HOW TO GET OUT OF A HOUSE
THAT IS ON FIRE
STOP. DROP and ROLL
Then you roll to the door. Touch it. If the door is hot then you
know that there is a fire on the other side. Then you get out the
window. If you are up high you wait for the fire-fighters. You had
better do it now and Go, Go, GO!
by Robbie and Radi
OCH!

Some time later another poster appeared near the fire-table written by Radi's co-writer with some assistance from Radi.

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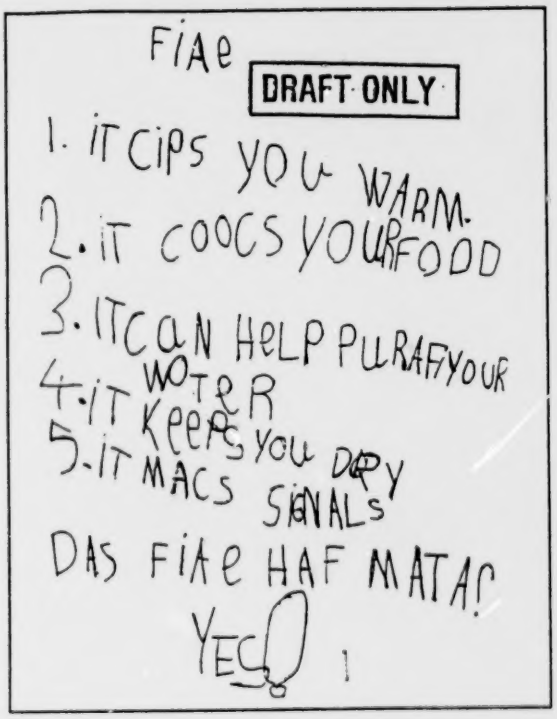
SAMPLE 11: 15th September 1989



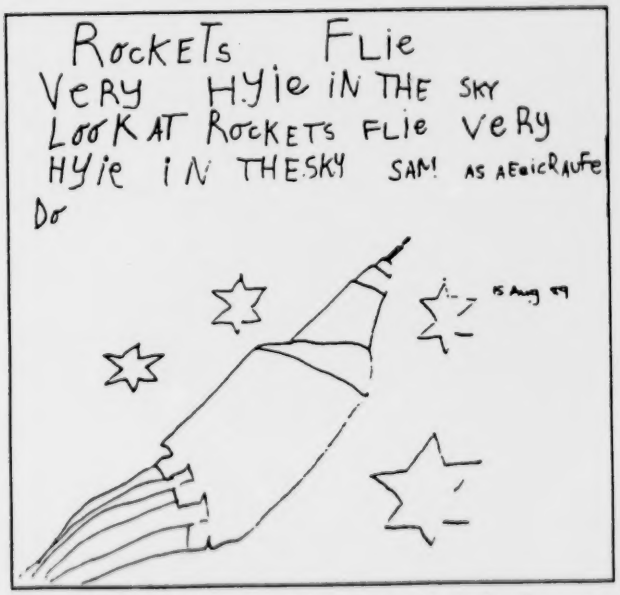
FIRE

1. It Keeps you warm.
2. It cooks your food.
3. It can help purify your water.
4. It keeps you dry.
5. It makes signals.

Does fire have matter? Yes!

In August, again influenced by books we had been sharing, Radi was trying out rhyming text.

SAMPLE 12: 15th August 1989



.....high in the sky. Same as aircraft do.

I collected the following draft and published book from Radi's grade 2 teacher. I had read and discussed *The Greedy Goat* with the class in November 1989. He had remembered it from the previous year and thought it was a good story. Many young writers use retelling as scaffolding to explore writing, though Radi did not use this approach as often as many do. I also find it interesting that this story was stored away in his linguistic data pool for so long before he used it.

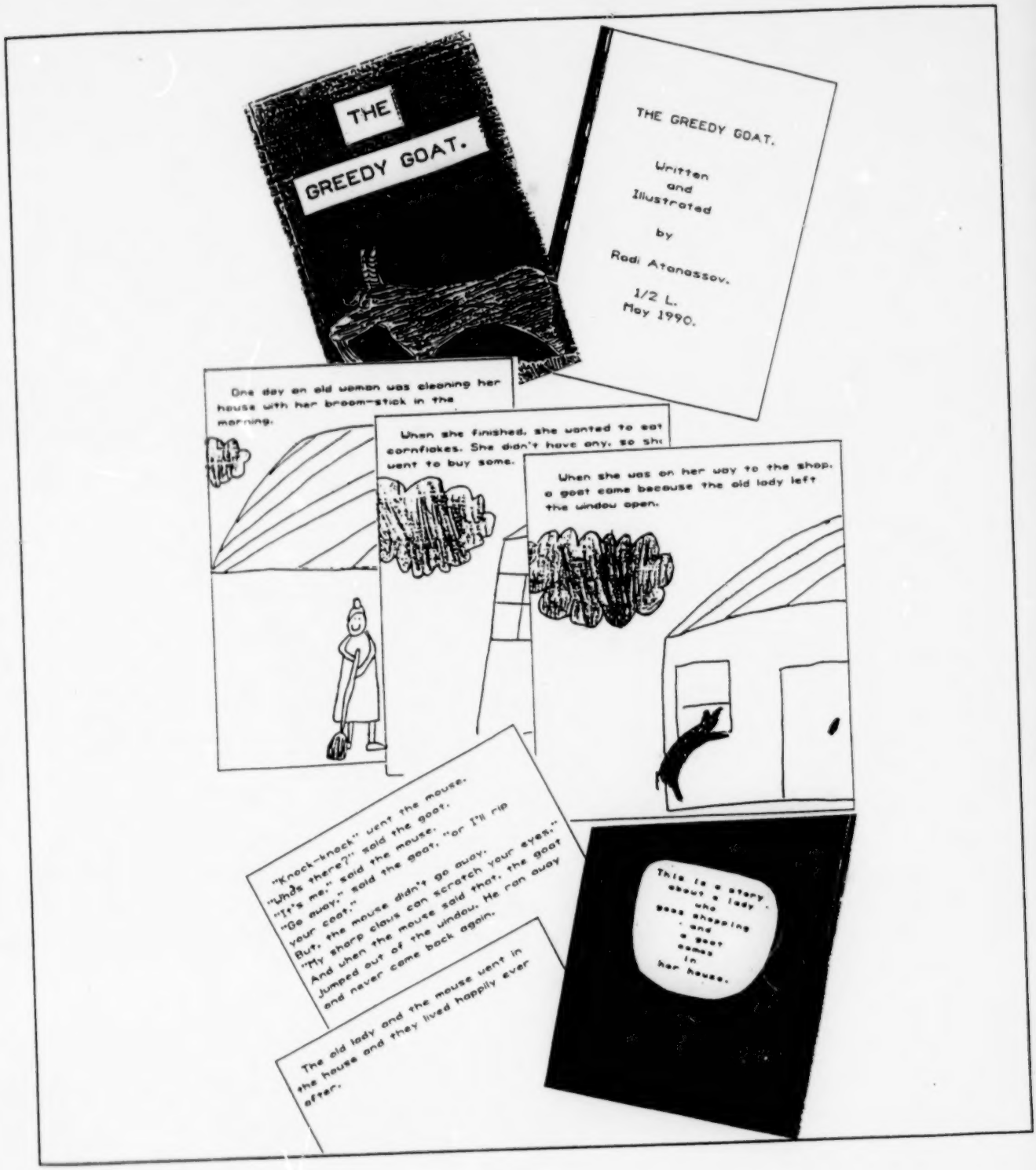
SAMPLE 13: Commenced 16th May 1990

One day an old woman was cleening her house with her brumesticke in the morning. When She fineesh She wanted to eat Kaikacks but she dident have eny so She whent to bay sam.

the mouse said that the goat jum pt out fnxfnxfrom the window The lade and the mouse wei in the house and thay livde hapali ever after

Two pages of the draft version.

SAMPLE 14: The Greedy Goat: A retelling (six pages are not included.)


THE
GREEDY GOAT.
THE GREEDY GOAT.
Written
and
Illustrated
by
Rodi Atanassov.
1/2 L.
May 1990.
One day an old woman was cleaning her house with her broom-stick in the morning.
When she finished, she wanted to eat cornflakes. She didn't have any, so she went to buy some.
When she was on her way to the shop, a goat came because the old lady left the window open.
"Knock-knock" went the mouse.
"Who's there?" said the goat.
"It's me," said the mouse.
"Go away," said the goat, "or I'll rip your coat."
But the mouse didn't go away.
"My sharp claws can scratch your eyes."
And when the mouse said that, the goat jumped out of the window. He ran away and never came back again.
This is a story about a lady who goes shopping and a goat comes in her house.
The old lady and the mouse went in the house and they lived happily ever after.

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The experience of the process of writing had been very important but it was the satisfaction of publishing a real book that inspired this seven year old to spend a great deal of time to produce a final product that conforms to the conventions of English syntax and spelling as well as many of the conventions of traditional tales and published books.

By grade 2, Radi had learnt much about written and spoken English , he was an competent reader and had a good grasp of the pragmatics of the language. I cannot claim that our whole-language classroom was the only reason for his fine progress, however I do claim that it supported his development by encouraging the continuation of 'natural' learning. It provided demonstrations of both written and spoken English, and explicit teaching in meaningful contexts. Most importantly it initiated him into the 'literacy club'. Would it have been more appropriate if I had presented him with explicit formulas for a variety of genres and made it compulsory to write to these formulas at set times? Should I have insisted that he wrote in a non-fiction genre about the tadpoles that were a focus of our classroom at the time of the fire-table?

I agree with Christie (1990) when she states:

> The only children who really cope in classrooms where they are left to 'work it out for themselves' are those that are already advantaged, though even those will benefit from more direct intervention than often occurs. Those who suffer most from policies of being left to find their own way and their own models in language are the seriously disadvantaged: those from backgrounds where literacy is less highly visible and valued and/or those for whom English is a second language. (p18)

Children from LBOTE do need more support. I have argued this myself many times (Turner, 1985:9) But, the question is what type of support? What type of 'intervention'? The text of the *Greedy Goat* provided an excellent opportunity to highlight the use of direct speech conventions in context at a time when Radi was developmentally ready to engage. Would Radi have learnt this lesson so well if the teacher had 'covered' inverted commas as part of a class lesson at a set time in a syllabus plan?

A whole language philosophy has provided me with answers and with a sound basis for my practice. As new research appears I enrich my philosophy with the insights provided, but my evolving beliefs continue to reflect what is currently labelled 'whole-language'.

This paper is based on an article, 'Process vs Genre: a non-issue in the whole language classroom', publish in *TESOL in Context*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1991.

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Lyn Turner is an experienced elementary teacher and ESL consultant who now teaches on the TESOL Graduate Diploma and Masters program at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.